

# The Effects of *Setting* in English Native Speakers' Use of Request Modification Devices

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## Abstract

The speech act of requesting has been widely examined both in interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics. However, most of this research has focused on the pragmalinguistic form to express the request head act and has given scarce attention to those modifiers used in the process of requesting. Furthermore, studies such as Nickels' (2006) have provided evidence of the effects of *Setting* in learners' realisations of requests. Yet the importance of *Setting* as an independent variable has not been the focus of empirical research either. Considering the need to broaden the scope of research on requests modifiers and how these are performed in different *Settings*, the present paper tries to offer an insight of the modification devices used by British undergraduate students while performing a role-play activity both in the academic and the non-academic *Setting*. Findings from the present study show that our participants modified their request moves both internally and externally, the former type being preferred over the latter and that, participants used more modification devices in the non-academic *Setting*. Furthermore, results show that both the rank of imposition and the politeness system also influenced participants' production of requests. A conclusion and suggestions for further research are drawn upon these findings.

## 1. Introduction

The speech act of requesting has been one of the most widely examined features in both the interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics fields. Specifically, a request consists in an illocutionary act in which the speaker asks the hearer to perform an action which is for the benefit of the speaker (Trosborg, 1995; Sifianou, 1999). Therefore, this speech act has been regarded as one of the most threatening speech

acts, since it intrinsically threatens the hearer's face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Given the face-threatening nature involved in making this speech act, the speaker may want to modify the impact of it by employing particular modification devices. These have been classified into two types: internal and external. According to Sifianou (1999: 158), internal modification devices refer to those linguistic elements that appear within the same request act in order to mitigate or intensify its force (e.g. Could you *probably* open the door for me?), whereas external modification devices appear in the immediate linguistic context surrounding the request act (e.g. Could you open the door for me? *I'm carrying so many bags that I cannot do it*). Research conducted on both native-speakers and learners' use of this particular speech act has mostly focused on examining their use of those pragmalinguistic formulae employed to express the request act itself (e.g. Can you ...?, Would you ...?, I need ..., You must ...), without paying special attention to the modification devices that accompany it (Rose, 1999; Cook and Liddicoat, 2002).

*Setting*, as defined by Nickels' (2006), designates the social milieu of the interaction. For Nickles, *setting* represents the contextualised place of a situation within a social location, for example, a classroom. Her definition is based on Hymes' (1974a) theoretical framework for analysing a communicative event. Hymes describes *setting* as follows:

The Setting factor is fundamental and difficult. It underlines much of the rest and yet its constituency is not easily determined. We accept as meaningful such terms as "context of situation" and "definition of the situation" but seldom ask ethnographically what the criteria for being a "situation" might be, what kinds of situations there are, how many and the like. Native terms are one guide [...] to determine behaviour Settings and to segment the continuum of behaviour. (1974b: 201)

According to this definition, we have identified two different *settings*, namely the academic and the non-academic *settings*, and we have analysed whether the use of requests differs from one to the other.

Considering these two aspects, that is the need to focus on the

modification devices employed when making a request in a specific *setting*, the aim of this paper is to analyse how English native-speakers' use internal and external request modification devices in different *settings*. Motivated by this theoretical background, the present study addressed the following research questions: Does the *setting* influence learners' realisation of requests modification? *AND* Do the rank of imposition and the politeness system also influence the realisation of requests?

## 2. Methodology

Participants taking part in our study consisted of twelve undergraduate students ( $n=12$ ) from two UK universities, namely those of Queen Mary University of London and University of Cambridge. Participants, five female and seven male students, were asked to carry out a series of role-play activities. All of them were native speakers of English and all, except one, knew at least another language to a certain extent. They were studying a wide range of degrees, such as Modern Languages, Veterinary Medicine or Social and Political Sciences.

The data were collected during an oral role-play activity they voluntarily performed. The participants arranged a time for the task to be carried out. Periods of thirty minutes were assigned to them throughout a day and they were asked to enter the researcher's office in couples. They were told that their interaction was going to be recorded and that their participation consisted in listening to several situations, both read and illustrated with photographs that the researcher had previously taken in different *settings*, and they had to act them out depending on the role assigned to each one of them.

This role-play activity was specifically designed for this study, since it elicited request use and varied according to the three politeness systems that Scollon and Scollon (1995) identified, namely those of a deference politeness system, a solidarity politeness system and a hierarchical politeness system. These three politeness systems include the general and persistent regularities in face relationships. Within the deference politeness system (-P, +D)<sup>1</sup>, there is a shared social level

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<sup>1</sup> P stands for Power and D for Distance. The symbol + means that there is a difference in Power or Distance amongst the participants, whereas the symbol - means

among the participants but there is no closeness among them. With regards to the solidarity politeness system (-P, -D) the participants are both close and equal. Finally, the hierarchical politeness system (+P) is characterised by asymmetrical social relations among the participants. Thus, we elaborated our role-plays considering this politeness system classification (see Appendix A): those belonging to the deference politeness system, that is, the situations involving professional colleagues who do not know each other well or people who do not know each other but belong to the same social scale (Situations 5, 7, 9, 11 and 12); those that referred to the solidarity politeness system, that is, interactions between friends, members of the same family, neighbours or workmates (Role-plays 3, 4, 6 and 10); and those that considered the hierarchical politeness system by including situations between teachers and students (Role-plays 1, 2 and 8). The rank of imposition in each situation was either weak or strong depending on the issue being requested. Hence, we had role-plays with a weak degree of imposition (Role-plays 1, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 11) in which the request was not considered as an excessive burden to the one who received the request; and those with a strong degree of imposition (Role-plays 2, 3, 4, 9, 10 and 12) in which the request was considered of great implication for the person being requested. Bearing in mind both the rank of imposition and the politeness system, we grouped them within the academic *setting* (GROUP 1) and the non-academic *setting* (GROUP 2).

All role-plays were tape-recorded and transcribed in order to analyse the amount and type of internal and external modifiers employed by the students when making the requests elicited in the different situations. For this analysis, we took into account the typology of peripheral modification devices in requests developed by Alcón, Safont and Martínez-Flor (2005), since it was developed from previous research on the fields of interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics.

### 3. Results and Discussion

As mentioned above, the main purpose of this pilot study was to analyse the participants' use of requests modification devices in

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that there is a close relationship of Power and Distance.

different *settings*. Table 1 shows the request moves obtained and the total amount of internal and external modification devices used by each couple.

Table 1. Participants' amount of request moves, external and internal request modification devices

Participants	Request moves	Internal modification devices	External modification devices
Couple 1	<b>14</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>17</b>
Couple 2	<b>12</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>15</b>
Couple 3	<b>13</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>11</b>
Couple 4	<b>14</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>8</b>
Couple 5	<b>11</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>20</b>
Couple 6	<b>14</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>75</b>

As can be observed in Table 1, participants employed a higher number of internal modification devices compared to their use of external modifiers. There was a total of seventy-eight request moves and all of them were modified either internally, externally or both. The participants had to act several situations out and as can be inferred from Table 1 the six couples resorted more to the use of internal than external modification devices. These findings support the study by Faerch and Kasper (1989), which involved native speakers of English and German together with Danish learners of those languages, in that internal modification was also higher than external. However, we should mention that these studies differ in the technique used in the data collection process. Faerch and Kasper's (1989) study used a written Discourse Completion Test (DCT), whereas the instrument employed in the present study was an oral role-play activity.

Considering our participants' use of internal and external modification devices, Figure 1 below illustrates the total *amount* of each group of modifiers, whereas Table 2 shows the distribution of request modifiers, both internal and external, of each couple within the

academic and the non-academic *settings*.

Figure 1. Total amount of internal and external modification devices

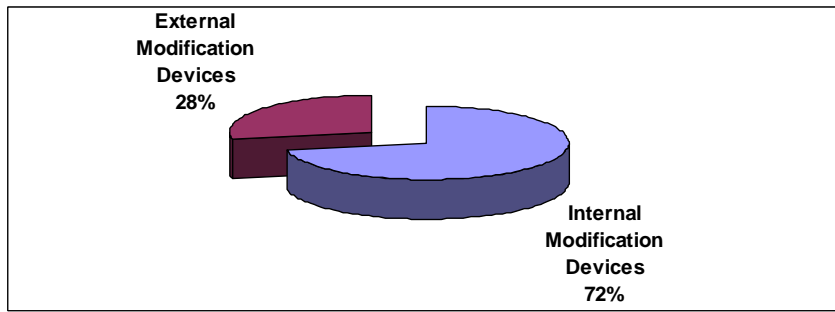


Table 2. Couples' use of requests modification devices in the academic and the non-academic *settings*

	Academic <i>Setting</i>	Non-academic <i>Setting</i>
couple 1	22	29
couple 2	35	35
couple 3	21	17
couple 4	12	13
couple 5	24	24
couple 6	15	17

As it is illustrated in Table 2 above, there was a slightly higher use of modification devices, both external and internal, in the non-academic *setting* (see Couples 1, 4 and 6). Couples 2 and 5 used the same amount of modification devices in both *settings* and Couple 3 used more modification devices in the academic *setting*. This shows that *setting* does influence learners' realisation of requests modification and therefore, we need to give learners a wide range of opportunities to demonstrate what they can do with the target language in different *settings* (Nickels, 2006). These results provide an answer to our first research question.

Regarding our second research question: Do rank of imposition and the politeness system affect the realisation of requests? Regarding rank of imposition, Table 3 below shows that our

participants (except for couple 2) used more modification devices in situations with a high rank of imposition.

Table 3. Couples use of requests modification devices in situations of low and high rank of imposition

	Low rank of imposition	High rank of imposition
couple 1	<b>24</b>	<b>27</b>
couple 2	<b>35</b>	<b>35</b>
couple 3	<b>17</b>	<b>21</b>
couple 4	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>
couple 5	<b>20</b>	<b>28</b>
couple 6	<b>11</b>	<b>21</b>

The following are two examples taken from our data. Example 1 is a request obtained from a situation with a high rank of imposition (Situation 2) and Example 2 from one with a low rank of imposition (Situation 1). Both examples were taken from the academic *setting*:

- (1) Student: *em I'm afraid I- I can't remember what you - how you explained this. I still don't understand it can you er can you explain it again?*
- (2) Student: *Hello, sorry I'm late, is it ok if I just sit down.*

The difference between examples 1 and 2, where time is the main thing being requested from the hearer, is that in order to request something that has a high impact on the hearer (Example 1) we tend to mitigate our requests to a greater extent than if the thing being requested has a lower degree of imposition on the hearer (Example 2). In Situation 1 although the student is interrupting the lecture, he only needs the attention of the lecturer for a couple of minutes, whereas in Situation 2 the student is asking the lecturer to use his own time to repeat something he already explained in class.

Regarding the relation between the situations and the politeness system, we found that all our couples, except for couple 5 in Table 4 below, used a higher amount of modification devices as follows: first, in situations in which the participants shared their social level but there was no closeness among them, i.e. deference politeness system; second,

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those situations in which the participants were close and equal, that is the solidarity politeness system; and third in situations with a participant in a higher position (the hierarchical politeness system).

Table 4. Couples use of requests modification devices in situations with different politeness systems

	Deference politeness system	Solidarity politeness system	Hierarchical politeness system
couple 1	<b>25</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>10</b>
couple 2	<b>33</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>12</b>
couple 3	<b>14</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>11</b>
couple 4	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>
couple 5	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11</b>
couple 6	<b>16</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>

Results shown in Table 4 above might be due to the fact that we need to mitigate our requests more with strangers than with people we know, and then we feel we should be quite clear (i.e. avoid using too many mitigators) when addressing someone of a different status. Hence, we might state that rank of imposition and politeness systems also influence the ways requests are modified in different situations within the academic and the non-academic *setting*.

**4. Conclusion**

The results of this study are relevant for language teaching in the sense that, as stated in Nickels’ study (2006), the perceptions of variables, such as degree of imposition, might vary among native and non-native speakers of English, and teachers might find it useful to assist learners in this sense. Our results show how native speakers of English use and mitigate requests in different situations within the academic and non-academic *settings*, and this might prove to be practical for foreign and second language learners use.

Results obtained by means of analysing participants’ request moves in our role-play activity indicated that (1) our participants modified all the requests produced in the role-play activity and used a



higher amount of modification devices in non-academic *settings*; and (2) a higher use of modification devices was found in situations with a high rank of imposition on the hearer and also, in those within the deference politeness system.

One important issue to examine in future research therefore is the need for a more thorough analysis of the *settings* with regards to the specific modification devices elicited, both internal and external as provided in Alcón et al.'s (2006) typology of peripheral modification devices and the relationship between the academic and non-academic *settings* with the rank of imposition and the politeness system as described by Scollon and Scollon (1995). Furthermore, it would be interesting to analyse how the same role-play activity can be used in the second and the foreign language classroom in order to elicit learners' use of requests. In the meantime, the present study has contributed to widen the fields of interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics by analysing how requests can be modified in different *settings* and considering variables such as rank of imposition and the politeness system.

## Appendix A

### GROUP 1: Role-plays related to an academic *Setting*

1. You walk in a lecture half an hour late and interrupt the teacher. Everyone stares at you. You want to know if you can stay. You ask the teacher.
2. You don't understand something from your book. However, you know your teacher had already explained that in his last lesson. You go to his office anyway and ask him.
3. You are at your university and have a problem with your laptop. You take it to one of the IT people. He has a lot of work and needs some time to take a look at it. He tells you.
4. One of the secretaries of the English Department has to leave work an hour early. However she still has many things to do. She has no time and needs help to finish her work. She asks her workmate.
5. You work at a university library and see someone using her mobile. Mobiles are not allowed in the library. You ask her.
6. A friend of yours borrowed your notes a long time ago. You need

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them for the exams. You ask her.

### GROUP 2: Role-plays related to a non-academic *Setting*

7. It's your first day as a cleaner at a big institution and you don't know where to go. You ask a security guard.
8. You work as a doctor and cannot find one of your patients' blood tests results. You phone the nurse and ask her.
9. You work at a bank. A lady just walked in asking for a big amount of money. You need to see some sort of identification. You ask her.
10. Your best friend drove his dad's car to the university today. You really want to try it. You ask him.
11. You are organising a party. You would like to buy a range of different cheeses but you want to try them first. You ask the butcher.
12. You are very hungry and walk into a bar. You just want a doughnut but you have no money. You ask the bar tender.

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